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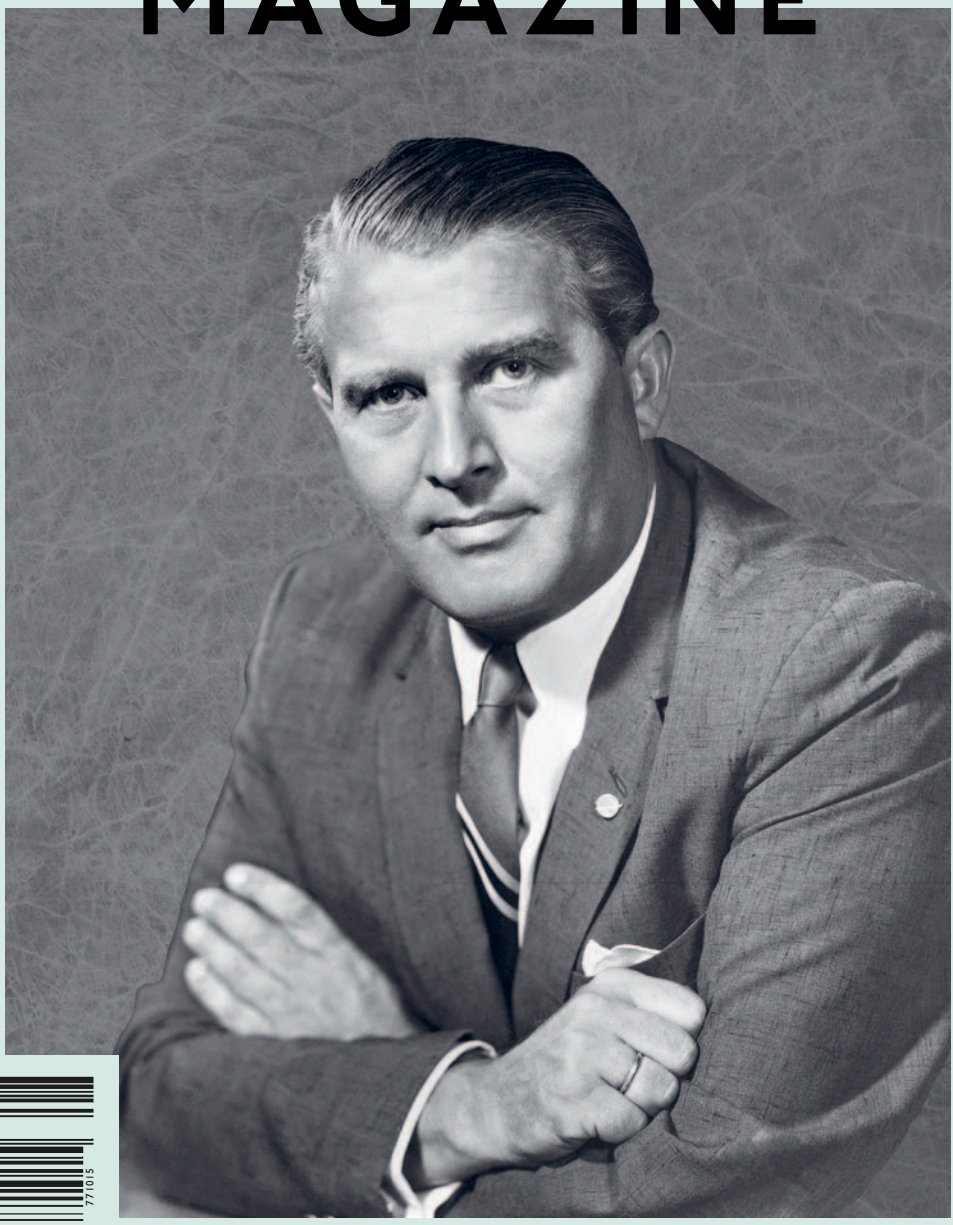
SHOPPINGHOUR MAGAZINE

A magazine bringing art, philosophy, poetry and critical theory together in exposing the nuances of contemporary life and culture



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Issue 8 — The Critique of Science

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The Critique of Science

Issue 8
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8

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(courtesy of NASA)
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Łukasz Izert
Low Resolution:

an intervention

Łukasz Izert

Low Resolution (LR) is a virus that substitutes our perceived reality with a virtual one. The structure of LR is based on the subjectivity of an image registered by human eyes. It feeds on the viewers' distraction and their tendency to complete the missing elements of the visible realm (developed as a result of receiving imperfect impressions generated by a computer screen). Thanks to these mechanisms it gradually comes in place of fragments of reality, drawing it nearer to the digital one.

ŁUKASZ IZERT

Łukasz Izert is currently in his final year studying for his Graphic Design MA at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. His practice includes video screenings, animation, installations and interventions in public spaces. His activities often oscillate around the domains of local social issues and cultural change. He is a co-producer of the Workshop of Mental Structures, the first theoretical workshop at the Academy in Warsaw. His films are published on artycok.tv and gablotakrytyki.pl. He also works in bookbinding.

Prologue
Yasushi Tanaka-Gutiez
Hayden White and the Paradigm of Profound Levity

I. I once overheard the historian and radical pedagogue Hayden White say something that resembled the following statement:

‘The misunder-standing is that science is considered more precise than poetry.’

Text by Yasushi Tanaka-Gutiez

Challenging the well-established dominance of scientific precision, White's claim encourages that the world be perceived outside that which is solely measurable. While an inch remains an inch yesterday, today and tomorrow, a poem captures how the poet feels at a precise moment in time. Following from this logic, the measurement of the objective world inch by inch tells us little about the myriad poetic precisions that make up the world we inhabit. But if this is true, why then is science considered more precise than poetry?

Offering a fundamental critique of science, White's logic makes us question the superiority of science that society upholds in near sacrosanctity. By introducing us to two notions of precision in the scientific and the poetic, he also introduces us to two distinctive modes of existence. And as will be shown, with the first resides a profundity based on a fear for our perishable existence and with the second, a levity based on a profound acceptance of being.

I. Scientific precision points to a transcendentalist precision, a device that secures the success of the humanist project founded upon the avoidance of death and the evasion of life. By humanist, I mean the presupposed egocentric relationship that man has with the universe whereby he is in purported control of nature. And with those fine tools of engineered scientism that man has created, it is an undeniable fact that he has nearly dominated nature. Consider biomimicry or what President of the Biomimcry Institute Janine Benyus defined in her 2009 TED talk as "sustainable innovation inspired by nature". Initially, "learning from the natural forms, processes, and ecosystems to create more sustainable and healthier human technologies and designs" sounds exciting. The excitement that comes with scientific innovation, however, is not the only motivation driving biomimicry. A study produced by the San Diego Zoo Biomimicry division argues that "biomimicry could represent $1.0 trillion of GDP in 15 years". (San Diego Zoo Global, 2010) As a potentially lucrative venture with scientifically avant-gardist goals, therefore, biomimicry presents itself as a project to be reckoned with.

The problem with Benyus' talk, however, is that in all her admiration for nature (and with her admiration I empathize), there seems to be no consideration for the defining qualities of human desire, a desire that inevitably drives her innovations. Efficiency may be one message, sustainability another. But in her conflation of the human capacity with that of nature, she overlooks the role of human desire in conceptualizing sustainability. Thus, in Benyus' message is embedded an unforgivable complacence: If nature is precise, and precision will bring us a better life, then by learning from nature we attain that better life.

Her example of carbon dioxide-absorbing cement inspired by coral reef serves my argument. The idea, quite self-explanatory, is that by developing cement that adopts the absorptive qualities of coral reef, we will help reduce the high levels of carbon emission harming the world in which we live.

An alternative and critical interpretation of this brilliant scientific effort, however, envisages a justification for the extension of global carbon emission limits in order to satisfy the so-called needs of industrialized nations. Rather than encourage society to desire less, this innovation finds a solution that will make such desires sustainable. Herein lies the farce of "sustainability" interpreted as necessity. Indeed, "sustainability" as conceptualized by Benyus is little more than desire parading as necessity. Some may say that this "necessity" offers a short-term solution of preventing planetary meltdown. But this is nothing more than a means to legitimate an over-consumptive human desire. Understood in this way, the beautiful naivety of Benyus' biomimetic proposal comes across as nothing more than an unsophisticated understanding of precision that the scientific community suffers from at large. Precision in the

eyes of scientists such as Benyus is a tool to manipulate nature and satisfy unnecessary desires that placate man's fear of death.

II. Poetic precision enables the individual to engage with the world outside of the fear that unrelentingly drives scientific precision. It demands that each and every human being consider the nuances of social life that are lost in the mobilization of a pragmatic being, of a being that has as a goal the aversion of death. At the fundamental level of survival, poetic precision may seem unable to offset the longstanding existential anxiety that is brought about by that reality of death. But where poetic precision cannot immediately fill a warehouse full of grain, what it can do is subvert the death complex, fear, and the associated need for "sustainability". By distancing itself from transcendentalist truth systems derived from the fear of death and inhospitable to ethical and thereby dynamic modes of criticality, poetic precision creates an opportunity for the original human motive to be questioned. Through this mode of poetic precision, we can and we must interrogate the obsession that man has for death; the obsession that man has for controlling the natural world.

In the alienating process of exerting oneself towards the interest of scientific precision and so-called progress, man is prevented from questioning the motive behind his praxis. Immediacy is dissolved into the scientist project that negates its importance and emphasises the triumph of commonality, universalism and uniformity. For only within such predictable moulds can humanity contest with the forces of nature, so unpredictable and awesome. The death of immediacy, the death of the unpredictable, is the goal of self-interested man insofar as we ascribe uncertainty to fear and fear to evil. While an aversion to the latter conditions of being may be an inherent quality of mankind, the unquestioning promise of scientific security has exaggerated this aversion to the extent that fear and evil are now indelible marks of contemporary life.

III. Shoppinghour and the New Educators hope for a poetic reconstruction of precision. We see the poetic intervention as a way to embrace the very thing that humanism continues to ferociously and fallaciously battle. The poetic existence is unafraid of the immediacy that life is ultimately founded upon. Embracing the immediacy of living, the insecurities that it comes with, the incompletion, and the levity, we can learn to let go of the resentment and fear of life and, by association, death. By embracing the insecurity that comes with immediacy as a fundamental quality of our existence, we are able to find beauty in the unpredictability of life and realize a truly profound sense of levity.

Through the poetic critique of science, we intend to create a pedagogic environment for a subjective mode of being that undermines the follies of a naïve scientism; a scientism which assumes the immediate transitivity of man with nature. Returning to Benyus' biomimcry, the naïveté of science is characterized by the misleading suggestion that the humanist project is tantamount to nature's mysterious will to exist. The problem is that there is nothing mysterious about the humanist project. It is pragmatic to the bone. In the name of scientific discovery, curiosity and other equally glorious notions are yoked to a will founded upon the fear of death. Fortunately and unfortunately, mankind was graced with the beauty of a brain. This brain has undeniably served us well. The multiple precisions that it has offered have given us most things that we today call the phenomenal reality, that is, what we can see, touch, hear, smell, and feel. In fact, this reality also includes poetry, and science, and love, and compassion, and givingness. However, the hubristic consequence of that phenomenal acquaintance has led us to believe that everything is in our control. Add to this the fear, that humanist fear of losing control, and we suddenly distinguish ourselves as

a superior form of nature. We've seen this treatment before. It is that which led to the multiple colonialisms that we continue to suffer the consequences of today. The abuse of scientific precision is what created slavery, holocaust, massacre, dictatorship, hiroshima and fukushima. Therefore without further ado and with strong imperative, we declare that a radical epistemological deracination be enacted upon all the niceties of scientific precision. It is time we mature beyond science's pathetic capacity to emulate the force of nature, support greed, and perpetuate fear.

IV. A profound sense of levity is found through the enactment of poetic precision, revealing the true nature of being as unpredictable, uncertain, insecure, and almost tragically impermanent. By embracing the ephemeral character of such a being, however, we can truly appreciate the beauty of nature in the endless messages that it lovingly entrusts with mankind. The truth is that there exists perfect transitivity between mankind and nature, just not humanist man and nature. Indeed, by staring into nature, we can stare into the inner beauty that the human species embodies. When the fearful interpreters of science can drop their profound determination to prevent death and accept the profound levity that comes with simply expressing the sublime qualities of the universe, we may finally learn to coexist with nature. We may finally learn to coexist with one another.

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Jonny Briggs
Nurtured Nature

Ph. ▸ 23 — 26

It’s hard to break our adult habits. Through looking outside of the social conventions I was born into I interpret culture as a mass of viruses; of trends, fashions and crazes spreading and evolving from mind to mind; and through this I acknowledge the sacrifices required in harbouring them.

01. ▸ Reclaiming
100 × 150 cm, 2011, lambda c-type print

Text and images by Jonny Briggs

Jonny Briggs

02. ▸ Smiling Inside
64 × 87 cm, 2011, lambda c-type print

In childhood I longed to be an adult. I wanted to have the liberties of being a grownup which at that age I did not yet understand, or realise what the price of losing childhood would be. For me it was a promised land of childhood, a utopian end-point that would far-surpass the pleasures of youth. Now I see childhood as utopian; I pine to reconnect with my lost state of mind, to be unconditioned, unsocialised, uninfected by the viruses of culture and see the world with fresh eyes; to return to a place where anything can happen in a world of possibilities. As my childhood self becomes more and more like a stranger to me, I interpret adulthood in itself as a mourning process of childhood, where we reminisce our past selves that are us, yet different from us.

I relish this era of unleashed creativity, where I thought outside the box because the box had yet to exist.

All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.

— Pablo Picasso

All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up. [01] I consider open mindedness where every new experience is a surprise in contrast to adulthood indifference; where a dog is approached with the same curiosity as a duck billed platypus. An absence of banality and absurdity in a world where normal doesn't exist, un-yet tied down by logic.

Children are un-yet confined by conventions of how we are supposed to behave and ways in which we are supposed to think. I remember my childhood sense of discovery where everything is hidden and waiting to be revealed. With an open childhood mind I was filled with curiosity and play with uncapped fantasies, whereas the movement into adulthood has closed the mind, and the norm is taken for granted. Perceptions become fixed.

Be it innocence or ignorance children are free from the social norms, categories, binaries and other adulthood restraints. In this sense there is a oneness, a wholeness to the child's unbounded thinking. There is little preoccupation with other people's perceptions, and with little self-consciousness of the seriousness of others we are closest to our natural selves, un-yet suppressed by civilisation.

In early childhood our instincts un-yet restrained are free to express themselves. In open pursuit of the pleasure principle, there is curiosity around their undefined instincts.

Children want to know about sexuality but the grown-ups tell them they need to know about something else; and they need to know about something else — call it culture — to distract them from what they are really interested in. [02]

Somewhere along the line we have forgotten that underneath our social mask of manners, niceties, etiquettes and restraints, we too have come from the wild. Children who are raised by wild animals behave like wild animals, and children who are raised by the civilised behave like the civilised. The ideals of civilisation are inescapably swamped with desires, no matter how much we strive to control them. We can never escape the wild, because it is inside us. We desire it and fear it, love it and hate it.

Through trying to think outside of the normal; of what we have been told to believe is normal; we can think in new ways, we can revolutionise the way we do things, and we can re-link to our childhood mindsets, to the magical unknown, to our pre-nurtured nature.

Notes

01. ▸ Pablo Picasso.

02. ▸ Adam Phillips, The Beast in The Nursery, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p.23.

Jonny Briggs

03. ▸ Natural Inside
80 × 82 cm, 2011, lambda c-type print

Children want to know about sexuality
but the grown-ups tell them they need to
know about something else; and they need to know
about something else — call it culture —
to distract them from what they are really
interested in.

— Adam Phillips

JONNY BRIGGS

Jonny Briggs studied at Chelsea College of Art (First Class Honours, 2008) and Royal College of Art (2011) in London. Awards include the Conran Award, the New Sensations 2011 Winner and NESTA Creative Sparks Award, and exhibitions include 176 Zabludowicz Collection, Paraty Em Foco in Brazil, The Marta Herford Museum in Germany, The Design Museum in London, FaMa Gallery in Verona and soon to include the Saatchi Gallery in London. Work has been published in the British Journal of Photography, The Guardian, The Times, Design Week Magazine and a documentary of the work was broadcast on Channel 4 in October 2011. Jonny continues to live and work in Berkshire and London.

Peter Eramian
Epilogue: Wernher von Braun and the Paradigm of Noble Irony

01. ▸ Wernher von Braun. Image source NASA

Like an empty vessel, an abstract practice floats aimlessly in suspense of its navigator.

Text by Peter Eramian

Like an empty vessel, an abstract practice floats aimlessly in suspense of its navigator. Once boarded, it acquires a direction, an intention — the first instance of its ethical contamination. The navigator harnesses the vessel's potential for something, injecting it with purpose, and sets sail. Then, there is the matter of its handling, *how* it is steered, by what manner and sacrifice it is impelled to motion. This second instance complicates judgements of the first. An ethical intention, it seems, cannot by itself secure an ethical journey. For if the handling of the vessel is conducted unethically then the navigator's intention will, to some degree, be compromised. Finally, the third instance is its destination, the outcome, complicating matters further. If either or both of the first two instances are unethical and yet it so happens that the outcome is ethical, should the navigator be acquitted? What if both first instances are entirely ethical and the outcome disastrous? Such are the abstract conundrums painstakingly scrutinised by deontologists and consequentialists, the two main branches of modern ethics, who carefully construct beautifully intricate hypothetical thought experiments to support their cases.

More recent thinkers have rejected such abstractions. Instead, they argue that *all* vessels, *all* situations and *all* practices, are always *already* ethically contaminated. The hypothetical separation between navigator and vessel is too simplistic. Dialectically, practices exist *because* they are practiced, and such cannot be separated from their practitioners. The critique of science, then, should not be concerned with science as an abstract practice. Instead, it should be fearless in confronting the already ethically contaminated reality of science, its urgent historical present. For understood more broadly, science is more than just a practice, it is a culture — a code of conduct and state of perception affecting every single moment of our tragically celebrated contemporary lives. Its birth and course can be attributed to a vast historical line up of politicians, philosophers, economist, cultural theorists and, ironically less so, some scientists; all of whom have contributed in establishing scientism as a daily 21st century practise commanded by the few and passively absorbed by the many.

The Creator Father, as represented in most popular faiths, is a Hypocrite par excellence. Since the birth of His omnipresence, His timeless Word of love, hope, prosperity and tolerance has been historically trounced and abused by political agendas fuelled by greed, self interest and domination. One can imagine His cringeworthy defence, as though caught cheating: "This isn't what it looks like, I work in mysterious ways, there's a bigger plan here that you just aren't meant to understand." Indeed, His "mysterious ways" may very well be credited as historically engendering the essence of ***noble irony* — a device that justifies and even legitimizes ethical inconsistencies and broken virtues as part of a bigger noble plan that simultaneously promises to deliver the contrary.** The figure of *Pater Familias* of modern science thus lends itself fittingly to Wernher von Braun.

Von Braun was an accomplished amateur musician with ancestry tracing back to European aristocracy. He could play Beethoven and Bach from memory. After receiving a telescope as a gift from his mother for his Lutheran confirmation he developed a lifelong enthusiasm for astronomy and space. At the age of twelve he caused a major disruption in a crowded street in Berlin by detonating a toy wagon attached to a number of fireworks. His childhood dream was to transport man to the moon and discover new worlds. Instead, in 1937 he joined the National Socialist German Workers Party (number: 5,738,692) and in 1940 he became an officer in the Waffen-SS (number: 185,068). During this time he developed the V-2 rocket that was launched towards London in 1944, which led him to say "The rocket worked perfectly except for landing on the wrong planet." On joining the National Socialist German Workers Party, he said "My refusal to join the party would have meant that I would have to abandon the work of my life. Therefore, I decided to join. My membership in the party did not involve any political

activities…" More concentration camp slave labourers were killed building the V-2 rockets than by its use as a weapon. In 1945 von Braun surrendered to and was recruited by the United States Army. False employment records were fabricated in order to expunge his regime affiliations from public record. Between 1950 and 1956, he led the United States Army's rocket development team, resulting in the Redstone rocket, which was used for the first live nuclear ballistic missile tests. He then developed the Jupiter-C, a modified Redstone rocket, which successfully launched the West's first satellite, Explorer 1, in 1958, signalling the birth of America's space program. His dream to help mankind set foot on the Moon became a reality on July 16, 1969. In 1975 he received the National Medal of Science for "his work in making the liquid-fuel rocket a practical launch vehicle and for individual contributions to a series of advanced space vehicles, culminating in the Saturn series that made the Apollo program possible."

Von Braun holds an air of authority and confidence which radiates with a celestial patriarchal glow. His brawny broad shouldered built, charismatic European accent and bold intellectual composure reinforce his utter Godliness. He was celebrated on the cover of Time Magazine in 1958 as "MISSILEMAN VON BRAUN" and developed the idea of a Space Camp for children, training them in fields of science and space technologies as well as mental development. He also worked at Disney Studios as a technical director for television films about space exploration. It would seem, then, that his intentions were well meaning. Indeed, throughout his life von Braun claimed to have remained committed to the ethical use of technology: "All of man's scientific and engineering efforts will be in vain unless they are performed and utilized within a framework of ethical standards commensurate with the magnitude of the scope of the technological revolution. The more technology advances, the more fateful will be its impact on humanity." He held a strong position regarding religion and science, stating that the two are not antagonists, but sisters: "My experiences with science led me to God. They challenge science to prove the existence of God. But must we really light a candle to see the sun?" In fact, he justified handing over his research to the United States Army as a moral choice: "We knew that we had created a new means of warfare, and the question as to what nation, to what victorious nation we were willing to entrust this brainchild of ours was a moral decision more than anything else. We wanted to see the world spared another conflict such as Germany had just been through, and we felt that only by surrendering such a weapon to people who are guided by the Bible could such an assurance to the world be best secured."

It seems that von Braun always knew how to present himself and what to say. As such, he worked in masterfully mysterious ways. On the one hand, he was a hard working apolitical visionary pursuing his noble childhood dream. His words were consistently ethically considered and insightful. Yet, on the other hand, his actions and affiliations to the Nazis and United States Army spoke a different truth. His inconsistent ethics and deep rooted noble irony thus make him an appropriate Father to most fields of modern science where his example, though in subtler forms, has become archetypal; and where claiming highly ethical apolitical principles, yet contributing obliviously in secular faith to the advances of ruthless military and economic expansion, has become a norm.

"The road to hell", writes Marx, "is paved with good intentions." (Marx 298) To separate science from the economic formations that support it would be a grave mistake. Technology reveals "the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations." (Marx 493, fn.4) Science and technology are thus composed as part of an ecological totality, what Lefebvre refers to as an 'ensemble' or Deleuze as an 'assemblage', of moments coevolving in an open, dialectical manner (Harvey

196). Their marriage to industry began in the 18th and 19th centuries, during the industrial revolution, entailing the breaking down of labour processes into mechanised component parts. The consequences were horrific and dehumanizing. As newly discovered machines and inventions grew larger, manufacture developed its foundations for large-scale industry, giving birth to a "mechanical monster… whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs." (Marx 503) Under these conditions, the special skills of each labourer were deprived of all significance, vanishing as an infinitesimal quantity in the face of science, the gigantic natural forces, and the mass of social labour embodied in the system of machinery, which constituted the power of the 'master' (Marx 549). An elite superior class of skilled and scientifically educated engineers, who designed the machines, would now reign over the labourers in alliance with the capitalists — a partnership not immensely different from that between religion and the feudal state that preceded it. Capitalism thus discovered a technological basis consistent with its rules of circulation and hoarding. Under this scheme, technological innovation meant better efficiency and thus extra immediate profit for the individual capitalist in competition. Historically, then, it is clearly evident that science and technology were never socio-politically neutral, since they were integral to the social relations, mental conceptions and ways of producing and living that they had been designed and intended to internalise.

Simultaneously, as capitalism technologically matured, its philosophy was refined. The influence of Social Darwinism was fundamental to this. Marx accurately identified that Darwin's theory and language was directly influenced by and drew metaphors from capitalist ideology (and specifically the writings of economist Thomas Robert Malthus), legitimizing capitalism as "natural" by appealing to theories of competition and *survival of the fittest* (a term wrongly attributed to Darwin but in fact coined by Herbert Spencer). Natural scientists, he argued, "because they failed to understand their historical moment and were barred by their methodological commitments from integrating human history into their models of the world, frequently ended up with at best partial and at worst serious misinterpretations of the world… [concealing their] historical and political assumptions under a supposedly neutral and objective science." (Harvey 197) Indeed, in a letter to Engels, Marx wrote "It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up the markets, 'inventions' and the Malthusian struggle for existence." (Marx to Engels 128) The case of Wernher von Braun's noble irony thus extends itself seamlessly from the scientist over to the capitalist, whose ethics of production and consumption are safeguarded by the ambiguity of commodity fetishism and a noble end none other but the self.

Ayn Rand, whose book *Atlas Shrugged* was published in the 50s, and by the 90s became the second most popular book after the Bible in the United States, devised what she referred to as a new heroic code of morality, that of *Objectivism*. According to this code, man's highest moral achievement is the achievement of his own happiness, and each man must live as an end in himself, following his own rational self-interest. The group most inspired by Rand were the entrepreneurs and scientists of Silicon Valley in California, who were working on biotechnology, computers, the internet and networking. Many of them named their companies and even their children after Rand and her novels. They saw themselves as Randian heroes, practising the noble virtues of selfishness. Alongside Rand were economists, philosophers, artists and politicians, who helped establish her code as the benchmark for a free and ethically progressive civilised West. However, herein lies Rand's noble irony, for her code lends itself untroubled in legitimising oppression and domination. On her position regarding

the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example, Rand stated the following: "… if you mean whose side should one be on, Israel or the Arabs, I would certainly say Israel because it is the advanced, technological, civilised country amidst a group of almost totally primitive savages who have not changed for years and who are racist and who resent Israel because it is bringing industry, and intelligence, and modern technology…"

In response to this alarming statement, suddenly, one may become suspicious of the ethics of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* hero, John Galt, who invites his audience to change the world by pronouncing the following oath: "I swear by my life, and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine." Large-scale technology and science, it seems, have come to embody the unforgiving and resentfully charged capitalist ego, whereby the noble claim that it is all for the 'betterment of mankind' is cheaply repeated without any meaning whatsoever in order to justify more corporate greed, more consumption and more exploitation. Perhaps today, at the very epitome and demise of global free market capitalism, we are in the position to judge whether such a code is ethical or not and, in doing so, reject the noble irony of Wernher von Braun and Ayn Rand as examples to live by. For is this monstrous irony, this virus, whereby we are aroused to action only by the fraudulent nobleness of selfishness one that we can bear much longer?

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